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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses two questions relevant to practices and policies in early childhood education (ECE). The first question addressed is, Given the worldwide focus on ECE, what are the priorities in practice-oriented research in school life? Educators struggle with the issue of whether research makes much difference to practice. It is suggested that the early childhood field is essentially ideological, and that practice is more influenced by ideology than by research. The second question is, If educators aim to raise the quality of ECE provided, what are the priorities for teacher education? In answer to this question, it is suggested that there is a strong relationship between the quality of ECE provided and the status of practitioners in the field. Factors that impact the low status of ECE practitioners are prevalent beliefs that teaching young children requires few skills and deserves low pay, and that teaching young children "comes naturally" and does not require professional training. The second of these two beliefs is countered by the observation that there are two differences between parenting and teaching young children. First, teachers work with groups of children, rather than one child or a few children, and teachers work with other people's children. In order to teach well, teachers should have a knowledge of child development. However, child development knowledge, though it can provide principles for practice, cannot determine the goals of education. These must be determined by the larger community. A third question, concerning the direction of educational policy toward quality or quantity of education, is raised but is not discussed. (BC)

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Symposium on Questions About the Quality of Early Childhood Provisions

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Third European Conference on the Quality of Early Childhood Education, Kriopigi, Chalkidiki, Greece
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As you see from the conference program, this panel has been asked to address three questions. The questions are difficult, and I have struggled to think of something positive to say in response. I am afraid I can only offer some comments, raise further questions, and suggest some possible items for the research agenda.

To begin with a caveat - my comments are based primarily on US experience and may not fit well with the contexts in which most of you work. I leave it to you to judge their relevance to your own situations.

I must add, however, that my experience of working with colleagues in many countries, suggests the hypothesis that colleagues who do the same kind of work across countries understand each other better than colleagues within their own countries who work in different sectors of the field. It is likely that teachers of young children, and those among us who are responsible for teacher education, understand each other across our countries better than we are understood by the officials who make policy within our own countries. In other words, the nature of our work is probably a more powerful determinant of our beliefs, ideologies, and

assumptions than is the larger national political system in which that work is done.

Question #1 Given the world-wide focus on early childhood education, what are the priorities in Practice-Oriented Research in school life? I want to share my struggles with this question.

The first struggle is with the issue of whether research makes much difference to practice, or, which research influences which practices?

It has been our experience at ERIC/EECE that among the hundreds of inquiries we respond to each year, we very frequently get calls such as What research is there that shows that what we are planning to do is effective? For example, what research shows that making the age of entry to school older is a good idea? In other words, research is often wanted to <u>support</u> decisions rather than to <u>arrive at</u> decisions. [I could cite similar experiences with questions about the effects of mixed-age groups that appear to be raised about every 30 years, and for the same reasons: to minimize repetition in grade (redoublement), and to save costs.

It might be interesting to conduct research such as a study that asks teachers to list the three most important things they do with children, and then ask them, What research do you rely on to support these practices? There is a sense in which practices are developed and adopted, and research is marshaled in *post hoc* fashion to justify them. Recent interest in Vygotsky's ideas raises this issue. Have practices really been changed to accommodate the Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, or has Vygotsky been cited--accurately or inaccurately--to explain and validate current practices? On the other hand, do we advocate particular

practices not yet adopted and strengthen and rationalize our claims of appropriateness by citing research--*post hoc*? If my *post hoc* rationalization hypothesis is valid, does it matter? Matter to what, exactly?

I have written elsewhere about the essentially ideological nature of our field (Katz, 1977). Any field in which the basic body of pertinent data is weak can be said to suffer a vacuum that is filled by ideologies. Weakness in the data of our field, especially longitudinal data, is inevitable partly because the growth and long term development of children is influenced by multiple factors, and partly because the definitive experiments that would settle our most serious questions would be unethical to perform. Our only recourse is to come together in meetings like these and put our ideas out on the table to be attacked, criticized, and refined. All of which is to say that, to a very large extent, practice is probably most influenced by ideologies, and probably should be, since ideologies encompass our values and beliefs about the nature of the good life and what is right and valuable.

Question #2 If the aim is to raise the quality of provisions, what are the priorities for teacher education.?

I was struck here by the word "if." This question could begin - like the next one- with the word "given." To raise the quality of provision has to be a given. That having been said, the question is a difficult one. We recently had a serious "flap" in the US over a statement made by E. Zigler, a major contributor to the initiation and development of Project Head Start, on national television. He stated that the quality of most Head Start programs is so poor that only abut 30% should be saved! Such a statement plays right into the hands of so many in the Congress who would be pleased not to have to increase Head Start funding. The potential political fall-out of his statement was very large. The

statement was certainly politically incorrect, though many believe that Zigler may be educationally correct about the estimated quality of the programs. This raises another difficult question.

How do we say openly that the quality of early childhood programs is too low without offending those people providing it--those very people we here are obligated to serve, many of whom are our own former students??

What we do know - very largely from the research of David Weikart - is that any provision of poor quality represents a missed opportunity to make a substantial and lasting difference to the quality of life and to the future of our young children. I suggest then that the phrasing we might use in response to the question is: **anything less than top quality represents a missed opportunity to get children off to a good start on the rest of their lives.**

I would also like to bring into this discussion another topic that I believe has a strong relationship to the quality of provision and to teacher education, namely the status of practitioners in the field.

One issue we probably all face--in some countries more than others--is the low status of child care and preschool teachers. To put it in the US context--which may not apply equally in all other countries represented here--educators generally have low status; that is, all teachers suffer from low social status. In the US, criticism of schools, teachers and their trainers amounts to something like an indoor sport. Within this low-status group, the younger the child you teach, the lower the status you have--probably also the less training and the less pay. I define status as one's readiness

to admit at a cocktail party that one works with preschoolers!

What are some possible explanations and implications of this observation?

First, in the US at least, there appears to be a cyclical phenomenon such that working with young children - especially in child care - requires few skills which demands low pay which is association with low status, and low pay and status jobs attract people with low skills and repel people with high skills.

I am not suggesting that this hypothesized cycle is inevitable or unalterable. It just may account for the enormous difficulties we face in trying to alter the low status, low pay nature of the field.

In addition, the younger the child, the higher the teacher/child ratio should be. If pay is to be increased, we are talking about raising the pay of perhaps two or three persons per group of children. In other words, doubling or tripling the cost per child of the service. How can this be paid for?

Second, those who work with our youngest children, especially in all day child care, are usually thought to be doing what "comes naturally" to anyone who has a baby. Mothers do what they do all the time; they always have, since the beginning of the species; and they do what they do by "second nature" all around the world according to cultural patterns learned from having once been a child oneself.

If we say that care and nurturance and stimulation of young children requires special knowledge and skills and several years of (expensive) training that you cannot have without

it, do we imply that this is also the case for the world's mothers? We have had along period in the US of the slogan "parents are the child's best teachers" or "parents are the child's first teachers." This slogan has even been incorporated into our set of National Goals: by the year 2000 all parents will become their children's first/best teacher.

If we imply that mothers also need knowledge and skills, what criteria are we using? What standards are we applying? Where do the criteria come from? Who are we to say what constitutes adequate -- to say nothing of "good" parenting? Psychologists? Pedagogues? Governments?

When official bodies like schools and governments attempt to "train" or educate parents, aren't they tampering with the family's own culture? Parenting is not related to culture--it <u>is</u> culture!

If we reject the view that mothering requires special skills, and accept the common sense view that it "comes naturally," is instinctive, or intuitive, then on what basis can we assert that teachers of young children require specialized training, knowledge and skills? What are some possible answers to this question?

There are two ways in which the nature of teaching and rearing young children are different: teachers work with groups of children, and teachers are working other people's children. Let us look at both of these features and what they imply for training, and so forth.

First, if working with groups of children is a major distinction between the nature of teaching and mothering, teachers need training in group management and group dynamics. This might be fairly easy to obtain through a brief apprenticeship with experienced teachers.

However, in the US at least, we rarely talk about group dynamics with respect to young children. Our textbooks for teachers deal with topics like transitions, managing group or circle times and story reading. But hardly enough to warrant a whole degree, certificate or diploma program.

On the contrary, our literature is full of reminders of individual differences. The emphasis in our ideological texts is on the fact that "all children are individuals." Reminders are frequent in the literature directed to teachers to observe, and "read" individual needs, learning styles, and so forth. Even our literature on the development of social competence is heavily focused on individuals and how individuals relate to their peers, rather than on group dynamics per se.

Second, what about the fact that teachers work with other people's children? What mothers know is based on the intimacy, proximity and constancy of their contact with their children. Lacking this, teachers have a sort of vacuum that must be "filled" by specialized education. Teacher must acquire knowledge and skills that can help them make reliable judgments about children they cannot know as intimately as they would if they were their own.

Can we have it both ways: to assert that mothers are their children's best teachers in ways that "come naturally" and teachers of young children absolutely must have extended specialized training? How do we avoid implying that children at home, with mothers who have no specialized training, are not deprived of development they would achieve if they were with well educated teachers?

If we show convincingly that expertise is required and makes a substantial contribution to development, are we also saying

that children without preschool programs are disadvantaged in perceptible and demonstrable ways? Imagine the political consequences of taking such a position! What might be the policy implications of such a position? What is the research agenda related to these issues?

Question #2 also asks us to address the implications for teacher education. This is a complex matter deserving a full conference of its own.

I would like to respond in the light of a recent exercise in which I was asked to comment on four essays written by teachers of young children in which they answered the question: What competencies should beginning teachers of young children have? The essayists covered many topics, most of which you would be able to predict. However, the only point on which all four essayists seemed to agree was that beginning teachers "should have a thorough grounding in child development." What, I wonder, do they mean by "child development"? If all of us participating in this conference undertook an assignment to plan a common course on child development, would we agree what should be included and covered? How much of Piaget's work would we require? Which version of Piaget, or neo-Piaget, or post-neo-Piaget would we agree upon? How much of psychoanalytically-based child psychology. Erikson's concepts, social learning theory, behaviorism, social constructivism, Vygotsky, and so forth would be essential? How does knowledge of child development influence practice?

Perhaps we could agree most readily on what beginning teachers should know about physical development. When I put the question What does knowledge of physical development imply for practice? to a graduate student, she answered that it tells teachers that four-year-olds cannot sit still very long! Is that always true? Many of us have observed young children sitting still for very long periods in many parts of

the world. Even in the US, four-year-olds sit still for long periods in front of television sets! If concepts of physical development and their implication for practice are culture-bound, imagine how much more concepts of social and emotional development are likely to be so!

Perhaps some child development knowledge is more useful and relevant to practice than other child development knowledge. Even if consensus were achieved on what child development knowledge is most useful, it is not clear how knowledge of child development is to be implemented in practice. What practices, for example, can be derived from an investigation showing that children's understanding of calendar concepts matures at an average age of about six years old (Zhang, 1993)? Should the standard calendar ritual in preschool and kindergarten programs be abandoned completely? Should the concepts be addressed only to those children tested as "ready"? Or should adults wait until children construct these concepts on their own? Inasmuch as all children eventually grasp calendar concepts, does the relevant child development knowledge have significant practical implications at all?

Many of you are familiar with the extraordinary quality of provision of preprimary education in the city of Reggio Emilia in northern Italy (See Edwards, Gandini & Foreman, 1993). The teachers of their schools have only a high school level of formal education, but the quality and quantity of inservice support and training is truly impressive. The fact that much of what has been accomplished in Reggio Emilia over a period of some thirty years of experimentation and dedication is now seriously threatened by the current political instability of Italy suggests that what we <u>know</u>, and what any teacher <u>knows</u>, is only one of many determinants of the quality of preschool provision.

As Professor Spodek has pointed out, child development knowledge cannot determine the goals of education. But it can

provide important principles of practice for implementing goals determined by the larger community.

Question #3. Given the scarce resources for early childhood education, should policy aim for quality or quantity? I struggled with this question, and can only say, at this point, that I do not know! Perhaps one factor to consider is whether, even a poor quality provision is "less worse" than what the children would be doing otherwise. But this takes us back to the discussion of Question #2, namely, who is to decide what children need, and what criteria should be used, by whom, to determine what is a "good" home life and what is not? The research agenda that would answer these questions is a long one!

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